

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000919

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/29/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#) [NGO](#)

SUBJECT: ICRC DRAWS DOWN FURTHER

REF: A. A) RANGOON 617

[B. B\) RANGOON 272](#)

Classified By: P/E, Mark Taylor, for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Burma office of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) plans to reduce further its expatriate and local staff in light of continued restrictions on independent prison visits and access to vulnerable populations in conflict zones in border areas absent any indications the regime will reconsider them. At this point the ICRC will retain minimal staffing should the regime have a change of heart. ICRC also has seen its access to border areas significantly reduced. Initially quiet in the hopes of finding a resolution, the ICRC may become more outspoken with the international media and sympathetic governments to draw attention to the disturbing humanitarian and political messages these SPDC restrictions convey. END SUMMARY.

#### DETENTION VISITS STAFF REDUCTIONS

-----

2.(C) Acting ICRC/Burma Head of Delegation Thierry Ribaux (strictly protect) in a June 29 meeting with Emboffs confirmed a June 26 media report, attributed to him, that the ICRC will further reduce its expatriate staff, already down to 28 from a pre-2006 level of 55 (see reftels), over the coming month as prospects for restarted prison visits remain bleak. Similarly, the ICRC also will pare its Burmese staff, already cut from 278 to 240 over the last six months, he disclosed. While emphasizing that the ICRC has no intention of leaving Burma altogether, Ribaux stated that staff dedicated to visiting prison and forced labor camps would now be cut to the bare minimum needed to respond quickly in the event of SPDC approval to visit. In addition, some expatriate personnel dedicated to protection work in conflict-affected border areas would also likely depart.

3.(C) Ribaux noted that the ICRC office continues to submit formal requests for independent prison visits to the Home Affairs Ministry, which houses the Department of Prisons; with no response. Meanwhile, the ICRC has received reports that prison conditions have deteriorated in various locations. Government-controlled press has reported Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA) and Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA) representatives made visits to prisons to provide food, medicine and clothing. Ribaux noted that these visits are on the wane as both organizations lack funding for sustained donations. Ribaux also disclosed that the ICRC heard that during these prison visits, the USDA attempted to condition assistance provided to individual prisoners on their joining the USDA, with formal membership cards to be provided upon their release from prison.

#### PRISON ACTIVITIES ERODED

-----

4.(C) The regime's less cooperative stance with the ICRC has also affected "Protection" activities for communities affected by border conflicts. Access to key areas of the eastern border expanded in 2000-2004. By late 2004, ICRC staff visited northern Kayin (Karen) state almost weekly for discussions with communities affected by conflict, ensuring that wounded villagers and IDPs received appropriate care. ICRC staff stationed at offices in Hpa-An, Moulmein, Kengtung, and Taunggyi also could access communities in Mon State and southern and eastern Shan State. Unlike the abrupt termination of independent prison visits, the GOB gradually restricted visits to conflict-affected communities over the latter half of 2005 down to two in early 2006. ICRC's restricted access to conflict zones does not appear the result of a clear order from the capital, according to Ribaux, but rather an intolerance of any foreigners in sensitive areas. Ribaux opined that the generals had no appreciation for the ICRC's unique status, which includes strict confidentiality; instead it lumped ICRC together with international NGOs as a foreign security risk.

#### ICRC IN MANDALAY

-----

5.(C) While Ribaux claimed that the ICRC has no timetable for further steps to minimize its presence, Mandalay ICRC representative Serge Thierry (Strictly Protect) disclosed during a June 26 meeting with Emboff that a mid-July country-wide ICRC/Burma staff meeting would take stock of the situation and recommend next steps. Thierry claimed that, according to ICRC's study, 67% of the wardens in the prisons visited by ICRC staff found the visits beneficial and did not want them stopped. Noting that this positive view of the ICRC prevailed in the Departments of Prisons, Thierry concluded that the decision to end independent ICRC access came from "high on top." Thierry claimed that he received better cooperation from Mandalay commander General Khin Zaw than from his predecessor, who departed in early 2005. While some of his colleagues in other ICRC/Burma offices face severe restrictions on movement imposed by local commanders, such as the office in Kengtung, Thierry stated that he is relatively free to travel in the Central zone without advance permission or participation of GOB personnel.

WHAT'S LEFT: PROSTHETICS AID AND FAMILY VISITS

6.(C). Staff at ICRC's six offices in Burma (Rangoon, Mandalay, Taunggyi, Kengtung, Hpa-An and Moulmein) now oversee two activities. The provision of artificial limbs to amputees (wounded largely by land mine explosions in conflict zones) continues at all six offices. ICRC sees the largest number of patients in Moulmein and Hpa-An, closest to the scenes of insurgent activities in Karen and Mon states. Denied direct access to communities in the conflict zones, ICRC staff discreetly use limited confidential interactions with amputees to obtain information about the conflict zones, confided Ribaux.

7.(C) ICRC also provides assistance to relatives of "persons detained for security reasons" because they often have to travel long distances for visits. In addition to facilitating the confidential transmission of letters between prisoners and family members, ICRC offices in Burma provide funding for relatives to make regular visits to the far-flung prisons and provide their imprisoned relatives with medicines, foodstuffs and clothing. According to Ribaux, ICRC offices continue to fund and monitor the visits of family members of 700 prisoners. To date, the regime has not interfered in this activity, he said.

9.(C) COMMENT: The ICRC staff in Burma is increasingly frustrated by the intransigence of the regime in accepting Geneva Convention provisions respected around the world. The June 26 press statement by Ribaux was a calculated move to tap outside sources of leverage to pressure the regime. The recent visit to Burma of U/SYG Gambari, who called for increased humanitarian access also probably influenced the statement. Lifting restrictions on the ICRC's access to prisons and conflict areas would be a welcome step showing sincerity by the generals in re-engaging the international community. Continued restrictions, on the other hand, should raise doubts about the generals intentions. END COMMENT.

VILLAROSA